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El Salvador: Where are the "disappeared" children?

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Amnesty International is today launching a new report on the children who "disappeared" in El Salvador during the armed conflict that took place in the country from 1980 to 1991.

The report, "El Salvador: Where are the disappeared children?", outlines the despair and tireless efforts made by parents and relatives of the disappeared children and non-governmental organizations to establish their fate, and the failure of authorities to address their claim of truth and justice.

"Those relatives have suffered for too long and deserve to know where their children are," Amnesty International said. "The failure of the authorities in El Salvador is only adding insult to injury".

It is estimated that some 75,000 people were victims of extrajudicial executions, unlawful killings, disappearances and torture, as a result of the armed conflict.

One of the worst periods of repression took place between 1980 and 1984, when the armed forces carried out 'cleansing' operations of the civilian population.

Various massacres took place during that period, including those of Río Sumpul and El Mozote, during which families became separated or parents were murdered and the surviving children taken by the soldiers. Some were taken to orphanages and other institutions; others were kept at military bases or in the houses of the soldiers and their families. Yet others were put up for adoption (both within the country and abroad). These are the "disappeared" children of El Salvador, whose families have been searching for them ever since.

In June 1982, Ernestina and Erlinda Serrano Cruz, 7 and 3 years old at the time, were caught up in an operation undertaken by the Salvadorean Army and became separated from their parents, brothers and sisters. They were captured by soldiers and, according to witnesses, were taken by helicopter to an unknown destination. Despite efforts made by their mother and others they are still unaccounted for.

"For 21 years the Salvadorean judicial system and the state have failed them and their family,

to such an extent that on 18 June 2003 the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights submitted the case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights," Amnesty International said "This is the first time that El Salvador will appear before the highest institution in the Inter-American system".

"Past and present Salvadorean authorities have failed in their duty to carry out thorough impartial and independent investigations and bring those responsible to justice in accordance to the San José Agreement - one of a series of agreements signed between the government and the armed opposition groups in 1990, near the end of the conflict. The agreement focused on respect for human rights, investigation into human rights violations, and the identification and punishment of those responsible." Amnesty International added.

"On one hand, the authorities have failed to investigate and punish past human rights violations. On the other, they refuse to even support efforts by parents, relatives and NGOs to find the disappeared children, like the establishment of a National Search Committee, given the evidence that many of them are still alive and have been found not only in El Salvador but in Italy, France and the USA, among other countries" Amnesty International stressed.

The organization calls on the authorities of El Salvador to:

support the creation of the National Search Committee;
implement the recommendations made by the Office of the Human Rights Procurator in 1998 and 2003 and by the Constitutional Division of the Supreme Court in specific cases;
fulfil their obligations under international human rights standards on reparation to victims of human rights violations; and
to ratify the Inter-American Convention on Enforced Disappearance of Persons.

For a full copy of the report, please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr290042003> (English)

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/eslamr290042003> (Spanish)

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